

WILLOW BEACH RANGER STATION
(Ranger Office & Equipment Storage Building)
Lake Mead National Recreation Area
Willow Beach Access Road
Kingman vicinity
Mohave County
Arizona

HABS AZ-220
AZ-220

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
INTERMOUNTAIN REGIONAL OFFICE
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
12795 West Alameda Parkway
Denver, CO 80228

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

WILLOW BEACH RANGER STATION (Ranger Office & Equipment Storage Building)

HABS No. AZ-220

- Location:** Willow Beach Access Road near Lake Mohave on the east (Arizona) bank of the Colorado River 11 miles south of Hoover Dam, approximately 3.5 miles (5.5 kilometers) west off US 93 from milepost 14.5 within Lake Mead National Recreation Area (LAME), Mohave County, Arizona. UTM: Zone 11, Easting 711245, Northing 3971431 (NAD27) "Willow Beach [AZ, NV]" 1:24,000 quadrangle, 1980
- Present Owner/
Occupant:** National Park Service, Lake Mead National Recreation Area (LAME NRA)
- Present Use:** Ranger Office unoccupied; Equipment Storage used by LAME staff
- Significance:** The 1963 Willow Beach Ranger Station is an intact Mission 66-era facility that exhibits the character defining features of a secondary visitor center as defined in Sara Allaback's Mission 66 Visitor Center Study, and of the ranger station property type as defined in the 2004 Draft Multiple Property Documentation (MPD) form for NPS, PWR Mission 66 Resources.¹ The building and designed landscape embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, and method of construction consistent with modern architectural and landscape design and form, as detailed in the Draft MPD Historic Context "Mission 66 and Modernism architecture and landscape design in the Pacific West Region: 1945-1972." This property is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places at the state level of significance under Criteria A and C in the areas of Architecture, Conservation, Entertainment/Recreation, Landscape Architecture, and Politics/Government. As an exceptional example of the type with a high degree of integrity, the Willow Beach Ranger Station meets Criteria G for properties that have achieved significance within the past 50 years.²

Project Information:

The anticipated NPS/LAME project "Redevelop Visitor Facilities and Install Flash Flood Hazard Protection for Visitor Safety - Willow Beach," includes a provision to demolish the 1963 Ranger Station by 2010. This project is included in the parks' General Management Plan (GMP), and is funded under the Southern Nevada Public Lands Management Act (SNPLMA) Program. It implements the Development Concept Plan, part of an Environmental Impact Statement

¹ Allaback 2000:22-24, 270-273, Jackson-Retondo and Warner 2004.

² Jackson-Retondo and Warner 2004: 44, Sherfy and Luce 1998.

appended to the GMP, for Willow Beach issued in 1994. A new maintenance facility, to replace the active (in 2007) functions in the Ranger Station, will be constructed in Willow Beach Wash near the present water treatment plant.³

The NPS Denver Service Center (DSC) commissioned HABS Level II documentation of the 1963 Willow Beach Ranger Station in anticipation of this demolition, and in deference to the NRHP-eligible implication of the Multiple Property Documentation Form for the National Park Service's Pacific West Region Mission 66 resources.⁴

Guided by DSC Project Manager Richard Marshall and DSC Cultural Resource Compliance Specialist Greg Cody, and with assistance from LAME Archeologist Steve Daron, project historian James Steely visited and photographed the building and landscape on 14-15 August 2007. Steely is Secretary of the Interior's Standards-qualified in the disciplines of history and architectural history with SWCA Environmental Consultants, Phoenix Office, sub-consulting to DHM Design, holders of an NPS IDIQ (Indefinite Delivery, Indefinite Quantity) contract with NPS Intermountain Region and DSC

Historian: James W. Steely, MSAS, Senior Historical Consultant at SWCA Environmental Consultants, Pheonix, sub-consulting to DHM Design, Denver. 6 August 2007- 29 February 2008.

Physical History:

The Basin and Range Province of desert landscape in Nevada and Arizona is traversed by the Colorado River (Lake Mohave), and US Highway 93 for modern access to Willow Beach at a pronounced bend in the river about 11 miles below Hoover Dam. The desolate terrain exhibits the "banded, contorted, many-toned rocks that register repeated episodes of bending, breaking, and partial melting through the Precambrian time."⁵ Within this geological conglomerate environment, a number of deeply eroded washes converge from the east banks of the Colorado into Willow Beach. About 1958, earth-moving crews threaded a winding road (Willow Beach Access Road) west from US 93 through a series of shallow canyons or washes to provide public access to Willow Beach harbor and recreation amenities at the west end of access road. The entry point to the Willow Beach Developed Area, like the other developed areas at LAME NRA, was to be demarcated by a Ranger Information Station.

Here in 1964, contractors completed the Willow Beach Ranger Station and Maintenance Building to signal the motoring visitor's arrival at the developed area. Designers sited the ranger station wing of the building to address the access road, from which visitors originally encountered information, comfort stations, and an opportunity to meet a ranger on duty. The utility wing of the building sits at a right angle to the ranger station and is barely visible from the access road. The adjoining maintenance area is screened both by the ranger station and an extensive concrete masonry unit (CMU) planter box and concrete masonry wall feature that steps

³ Cody 2007.

⁴ Jackson-Retondo and Warner 2004.

⁵ Chronic 2000:110.

down along the site. This feature also screens a long wide bituminous paved maintenance area. The northwest reentrant angle of the wings defines the maintenance yard screened from public view by its lower .. level, by the wing wall extending 114' west from the public entry, and by an abrupt rocky bluff immediately north of the composition.

The low one-story L-shaped building is constructed of single-wythe CMU bearing walls laid in a stack bond pattern, and steel beams with a flat metal deck and built-up roof system. Inside, a split-level poured-concrete floor system is defined by the exterior walls primarily of CMUs, supported by spread-foot foundations. Interior partitions in the ranger station wing are of stud frames and drywall. Floors are carpeted and ceilings are painted drywall, while restroom and utility floors are exposed concrete. Light fixtures are generally fluorescent tubes throughout. The ranger office is connected on the interior with the information room, but its exterior access is to the north onto a small concrete porch with tubular metal railing leading down four concrete steps into the maintenance yard.

The front (south elevation) of the building is visually and spatially integrated to the topography of the surrounding landscape by the CMU planters and stepped walls. The narrow rectangular ranger station wing is oriented east-west and measures approximately 47'-6" long and 18' wide (all room names and U.S. customary units from Newcomb 1963). The interior of this wing is divided into 2 distinct areas. The largest area contains a relatively sizeable visitor information area; a partition separates a small ranger's office from the lobby. The balance, an area less than a third of the wing at the north end of the building, encloses men's and women's restrooms. The south wall facing the road consists primarily of floor to ceiling glazing. Judicious use of a 1'-6" window module creates a local symmetry that relates to the interior of each space, yet results in a somewhat irregular and asymmetrical fenestration pattern on the exterior. The metal frame windows were originally a combination of louvered (or jalousie) and fixed glazing. The irregularity and asymmetry are skillfully unified by a 5'-wide covered porch that runs the length of the building, and two 12'-8" long screens. Each screen is constructed of 8x8x8 concrete masonry units laid with the cavities exposed and in a stack bond pattern, resulting in a concrete lattice screen. Each screen is framed by an exposed painted steel I-section column on each side. The two screens are placed with a 12'-wide space between them. This opening reveals one expanse of regularly spaced windows on the elevation. An exposed I beam, with rectangular web cutouts at each end, spans across the screens and supports the outside edge of the roof that covers the porch. Access to the porch, information lobby, and the restrooms is provided at either end of the screens.

The north-south maintenance utility leg of the building is constructed in the same manner as the ranger station wing of the building, although with a more utilitarian expression. Casement windows and solid doors are in painted steel frames. The wing is about 27 feet deep, enclosing (south to north) a "multi-shop" workroom with exterior access into the maintenance yard and interior doorways into the toilet, the storage room, and the tool room; a flammable storage room with exterior access from the yard; and a service equipment two-vehicle garage with a 17-foot-wide rollup door facing west onto the maintenance yard. Interior surfaces are painted CMUs and partition drywall.

Character-defining features are encompassed within "the Mission 66 planning principle of creating discrete functional zones" resulting in: automobile access and parking; a small public space adjacent to the ranger office; exterior-access comfort stations; and attached utility garage and maintenance yard concealed from the public. The "established elements of modern design" (see Historical Context below) are arranged in a low-profile composition with strong horizontal lines, assembled through the raised concrete foundation, steps, and integral planter boxes; shallow roof line with extended metal roof I beams at the porch (each beam terminating in a distinctive cutout of the web); CMUs with colored add-mixture, to blend with the surrounding desert landscape; and large floor-to-ceiling plate-glass windows lighting the information room and the ranger office. The "Equipment Storage Building"⁶ wing of the ensemble positions the facility's maintenance area "behind and down from the ranger station ... away from public view and direct access." In concert with characteristics of setting for the ranger station's public presentation, "the natural topography, landscape and building design were used to conceal the utility area from public view and access."⁷

The natural topography provides transit for the Willow Beach Access Road and space for the Ranger Station in this large wash, or shallow canyon, about 156 feet (48 meters) wide and about 25 feet (8 m) deep. Some excavation of the flanking bluffs was necessary to accommodate the road on the south side of the canyon and the building on the north side. A low retaining wall of red-colored add-mixture CMUs, matching the building, begins about 525 feet (155 m) east of the building and winds westerly along the serpentine road, defining a current overflow-parking area and buttressing underground water and wastewater utilities. The retaining wall continues west from the building about 200 feet (60 m) parallel to the 114' (34 m) wing wall that masks the maintenance yard. Plantings in the designed landscape include native ironwoods and acacias, and introduced oleanders and palms. A pair of mature Mexican (or possibly California) fan palms at the southeast corner of the Ranger Station provides a dramatic vertical element to balance the strong horizontal lines of the building and hardscape. Unfortunately, Willow Beach planners sited the Ranger Station within trajectories of its shallow canyon's washes. Flash flooding and visitor deaths nearby sealed the facility's unintended fate during a 1974 storm. The public still obtained visitor information from the building's information room through 1994, but completion that year of the pre-engineered Fire Station/Ranger Office shifted information services to the new metal building at Willow Beach Harbor.⁸

Despite abandonment of the public functions, and recent re-grading of the road and parking lot that apparently removed the original flagpole, the Willow Beach Ranger Station and its associated landscape exhibit high levels of integrity of location, design, materials, workmanship, feeling, setting, and association.

Historical Context:

In the 1930s as a result of the Franklin Roosevelt Administration's New Deal, the National Park Service ballooned from a small bureau managing mostly western national parks into a huge

⁶ Newcomb 1963.

⁷ Jackson-Retondo and Warner 2004: 33, 24-25, 42-44.

⁸ Turnbull 2001, Cody 2007, Daron 2007.

employer with the nationwide assignment of setting scenic, recreation, and commemorative standards at national, state, and local park facilities. During the decade, NPS was celebrated for its signature application of what is now called "NPS Rustic" style to buildings, structures, and landscapes, not only in national parks but through its assistance to state and local parks as well, primarily utilizing Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) labor.⁹ In 1936 after completion of Boulder (later Hoover) Dam on the Colorado River, NPS and the water-managing Bureau of Reclamation signed a precedent-setting agreement for the Park Service to develop and manage the dam's Lake Mead shoreline as the first "national recreation area." The U.S. Bureau of Public Roads and Arizona State Highway Department completed U.S. Highway 93 for dam access from and to Kingman by 1936.¹⁰ NPS directed initial CCC improvements at the new lake's Boulder Beach District, Nevada, in 1940, but after 1941 World War II postponed comprehensive recreation development along the lake in Arizona and Nevada for more than a decade.¹¹

From about 1940 to 1954, as a result of World War II and its complex political and economic aftermath, Congress made very little funding available for existing or new facilities in national park units. During this same period in contrast, annual national park system visitation increased from 17 million to 54 million nationwide. Existing facilities deteriorated at a rapid rate, despite the unprecedented New Deal construction program of the 1930s, and suffered from overuse, economic neglect, and inadequate capacity.¹² Lake Mead joined a number of national parks in Arizona and California that absorbed huge numbers of visitors within a day's drive from the booming population centers of Phoenix and Los Angeles. Meanwhile, in 1947 the Truman Administration facilitated the name change of Boulder Dam to Hoover Dam, and the associated renaming of Boulder Dam Recreation Area to Lake Mead National Recreation Area, jointly managed by NPS and the Bureau of Reclamation. In 1952 the Bureau of Reclamation completed Davis Dam on the Colorado River 67 miles (108 kilometers) south of Hoover Dam, creating 44-square-mile (71 km²) Lake Mohave immediately downstream of the dam and Lake Mead. Congress then expanded the national recreation area to include both banks of the river (now Lake Mohave) between Hoover and Davis Dams, including the Willow Beach landing and harbor on the east bank in Arizona.¹³

NPS Director (1951-1964) Conrad Wirth conceived the Mission 66 program in 1955, responding both to the deterioration of park infrastructure as well as the ever-increasing "auto mobility"¹⁴ and prosperity of the American public. Enacted by Congress and signed by President Dwight Eisenhower in 1956, Mission 66 projected a 10-year, billion-dollar development program to upgrade facilities in all national park units by 1966, the 50th anniversary of the National Park Service.¹⁵ NPS planners focused considerable Mission 66 attention on the sprawling national recreation area on Lakes Mead and Mohave, by 1958 including "water and power system improvements at Willow Beach."¹⁶

⁹ Carr 1999:16.

¹⁰ Bruder 2003:56, 60.

¹¹ NPS, n.d.

¹² Carr 1999:17.

¹³ NPS, n.d.

¹⁴ Jackson-Retondo and Warner 2004:19.

¹⁵ NPS 2007.

¹⁶ Jackson-Retondo and Warner 2004:14.

Ranger stations constructed for Lake Mead National Recreation Area, and throughout the NPS Pacific West Region, during the Mission 66 era also functioned as "secondary visitor centers" for far-flung developed areas. These ranger stations, while smaller in scale than primary visitor centers, served a public-information function, as clear expressions of the operational, design, and planning principles of the Mission 66 program. Unlike many pre-World War II ranger shelters, often built in back country, the Mission 66-era ranger station stood prominently at the entrance point of a developed area, highly visible from and easily accessible by automobiles. The scale of these facilities and their limited parking areas positioned ranger stations as quick stopping points for motorists, for their initial point of contact and orientation within developed areas. As a result, Mission 66 ranger stations served important programmatic roles by providing visitor information plus restroom and water services, in addition to their official park-unit presence and control, in remote developed areas of the National Park Service.¹⁷

After completion of the Willow Beach Ranger Station in 1963, motoring visitors emerging from miles and miles of rough desert scenery may have arrived with the sudden impression of visiting the sleek modern home of a wealthy recluse. But few Lake Mohave patrons in the 1960s would recognize this Ranger Station as a refined architectural statement deeply rooted in European Modernism, specifically avant-garde compositions from the 1920s and 1930s of architects Richard Neutra (e.g. Lovell Heath House, Los Angeles, 1927), Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (e.g. Germany's exhibit at the Barcelona Exhibition, Spain, 1929), Ie Corbusier (e.g. Madame De Mandrot House, France, 1930), and others.¹⁸ These modernists' prototype "boxes" (also pitched as "machines to live in"), void of "ornament" but textured with "organic" masonry and geometric steel frames, captured the adoration of a number of American architects before World War II, and virtually all young architecture students throughout three decades after the war.¹⁹

Thus Mission 66 designs, including signature NPS commissions by Neutra and other noted modernists, followed contemporary American Modernism as part of the nation's embrace of its mid-century European immigrants (and in turn, these pilgrims' earlier recognition of American modernist works by Frank Lloyd Wright and others).²⁰ "Mission 66 architects (whether in-house or consultants)," writes landscape historian Ethan Carr in comparing pre-war NPS Rustic with post-war National Park Modern styles, "employed free plans, flat roofs, and other established elements of modern design...."

The architects also used concrete construction and prefabricated components [E]arthtoned colors, and low, horizontal massing also helped continue the [NPS Rustic] tradition of reducing visual contrasts between building and site. Mission 66 architecture was not picturesque or rustic, but it did "harmonize" with its setting (at least in more successful examples), although in a new way.²¹

¹⁷ Ibid 2004:23.

¹⁸ Frampton 1987:248, Jordy 1976:206-207, Hitchcock and Johnson:1932 [1966 reprint]:182-183.

¹⁹ Jordy 1976:206208.

²⁰ Allaback 2000:272.

²¹ Carr 1999:18.

Le Corbusier particularly inspired the use of local materials with his innovation of structural slab walls of native stone,²² reflected 33 years later at Willow Beach through its reddish colored admixture concrete blocks that blend with the surrounding natural outcrops. And Mies van der Rohe, who immigrated to the United States in 1937, elevated the structural steel I beam to the status of ornament through his well-publicized 1940s redevelopment of Armour Institute (later named Illinois Institute of Technology) in Chicago.²³ At Willow Beach, hidden I beams atop the CMU walls support the roof system, and exposed I beam columns frame the square CMUs of the porch screen. Four visible horizontal I beam roof joists, supporting the partly cantilevered porch roof, dramatically convey Mies's "idealization of the I beam"²⁴ with cutout webs extending about 20 inches beyond the porch canopy.²⁵

The NPS Western Office of Design and Construction (WODC) in San Francisco likely supervised design of the Willow Beach Ranger Station. Its 1963 construction drawings were signed by "Newcomb" for the "Southwest Region",²⁶ but likely originated from WODC. NPS architect Robert Newcomb worked at WODC in 1963; he transferred with the closing of WODC to the Denver Service Center (DSC) as Chief Architect in 1972.²⁷

Sarah Allaback, architectural historian and pioneer chronicler of Mission 66, describes the WODC shop and credits much of the "zeitgeist" of NPS design during Mission 66 to veteran architect Cecil Doty.

When Cecil Doty began his career with the Park Service in the early 1930s, adobe, boulders, and hand-hewn timber were the basic materials for park buildings As an architect for ... (WODC) in 1954, Doty would find himself accommodating Park Service needs with modern buildings of steel, glass and concrete block.²⁸

Additional research on the Willow Beach Ranger Station would determine more on the background of Robert Newcomb and his design career and influences, whether directly from Doty, from a modernist architectural education, or both. Further study might also identify the 1963 building's and landscape's contractor, who deserves much credit for assembling a compact masterwork and its infrastructure in an extremely remote location.

²² Jordy 1976:206-207.

²³ Frampton 1987:248.

²⁴ Frampton 1987:233.

²⁵ Newcomb 1963.

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²⁷ Wheaton 2007

²⁸ Allaback 1999:19.

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